

The Revolution Still Has Soft Spots

By STEPHEN KINZER

MANAGUA, Nicaragua — Six and a half years after the Sandinista revolutionaries swept into power, they have not achieved their goals. Unemployment is chronic and widespread; factories stand idle; export earnings have tumbled; housing construction is at a virtual standstill; foreign debt has tripled; goods are often scarce or unavailable. Many Nicaraguans are frustrated and angry that their conditions of life are, in some ways, worse than before the revolution.

President Daniel Ortega Saavedra appears acutely aware of the level of dissatisfaction. After delivering his annual report to Parliament last month, he launched into an extemporaneous monologue about the "errors and deficiencies" of his Government. He said it had fallen behind in its debt payments and was therefore unable to use millions of dollars in credits from friendly countries. He put the inflation rate at 328 percent, and said education and health care programs were being cut back. "We are not doing too well," he concluded. "We are having problems."

Mr. Ortega did not hesitate, however, to take credit for what his Government had accomplished. The number of students in high schools was at a peak and that a reorganized police force had made Nicaragua second in Latin America in the proportion of crimes solved, he said, and health officials did not report a single case of polio during 1985, which is largely attributable to vaccination campaigns sponsored by Sandinista groups. He did not have to mention that his Government provides food and basic goods to all needy families at subsidized prices. The revolution's most enthusiastic defenders include young people and the tens of thousands of rural laborers who have benefitted from land distribution.

Government officials acknowledge that there is a good deal of grumbling in Nicaragua. The reasons are not only economic. The revolutionary Sandinista program is still very new and jarring to many Nicaraguans. The Government's sweeping changes in patterns of commerce, land ownership and social organization have provoked deep resentment in many quarters. A military



Gemma-Lielsen / Matthew Naythons

Bare shelves at a supermarket in Managua.

draft, imposed two years ago for the first time, is unpopular. In addition, some religious Nicaraguans view Sandinista rule as disrespectful to traditional church authority.

With all this dissent, it would appear that anti-Government rebels, known as contras, have a ready made popular base. In fact, the rebels have never gained a foothold in the capital or any other populated area. They have suffered major setbacks at the hands of the Sandinista army, and are pinning their hopes on the Reagan Administration, which has asked Congress to give them \$100 million in military and non-military aid.

The people of Nicaragua, who appear more anxious for prosperity and tranquility than for political change, have never risen up in any visible way to support the contras. By contrast, when the Sandinistas were organizing a rebellion in the 1970's they found many civilians ready to shelter them, feed them and even die for them. The contras, much to the disappointment of their

backers, have rarely, if ever, managed to spark the same devotion.

So popular discontent does not necessarily mean that Nicaraguans are ready to support the contras. Some may be instinctively sympathetic to the rebel cause but discouraged by the rebels' lack of progress. Others worry that bringing the contras to power might mean a return to the days of the deposed Somoza family dictatorship, which some senior contra leaders served as military officers. Still others fear the vigilant security police, who announced last week that they had caught three C.I.A. agents working to infiltrate the Interior Ministry. Many Nicaraguans are simply weary of war, which has battered the country for eight years almost without pause and has taken 14,000 lives since 1980. "The Christian seeks his enemy's repentance, not his death," Bishop Pablo Antonio Vega said last week in a reprimand to the warring groups.

One senior Sandinista leader, Minister of Agriculture Jaime Wheelock, said most Nicaraguans recognize that the Sandinistas are severely restricted because they must spend nearly half the national budget on defense. "As long as people perceive that we are on the side of the poor and dispossessed, and as long as they perceive that we are victims of a foreign aggression, they will be with the revolution," Commander Wheelock said. "In this sense, it may even be that the aggression helps us. If we were at peace, it would be harder for us to explain the causes of economic problems."

Mr. Wheelock, who is a member of the nine-man Sandinista National Directorate, suggested that the Government grows stronger every day it remains in power. "Thousands of people are still here working, even though they may disagree with our policies," he said. "Every one working in this society is within the political framework we have established, and that in itself is a measure of our success."